

Schools propose charges for bus rides

Published on: Thursday, November 18, 2010

By Paige L. Hill

Montgomery County Public Schools may charge students bus fees in the coming school years if legislation goes through allowing the school district to charge for transporting students to magnet programs, according to Board of Education President Pat O'Neill.

"I don't know how bad our budget hole is going to get this year or next year," O'Neill said. "It could help."

Two weeks ago, Sen. Richard Madaleno Jr. (D-Dist. 18), of Kensington, proposed the bill to "help alleviate the school system's budget squeeze" and will introduce it at an upcoming General Assembly session. The bill would mean parents would have to pay a fee if their child partakes in magnet, immersion or other optional programs that require extra transportation.

"We are looking at a budget crisis on the state and local levels, and we don't want education to suffer above all," Madaleno said. The plan seems to be already in motion since the board passed a 7-1 vote earlier this month to lift a 1997 state ban on bus fees within the county. During that vote, O'Neill pointed out that Montgomery County was the last county in the state to not overturn the state law.

"Even if the ban is repealed, it doesn't necessarily mean fees will be charged," O'Neill said. The lone dissenting vote on the ban came from board member Laura Berthiaume who said she was worried the fee would result in putting a price tag on magnet schools, and therefore defeat the purpose of making gifted programs available to all students, regardless of economic background.

"Do you want to have two unequal school systems, one that you have to buy your way into?" Berthiaume said at the vote.

"I am not going to support this because I think all 24 Maryland school systems are by Constitution prohibited from charging a fee for transporting students," Berthiaume said. "I think any fee imposed for transportation involving the curricular system, the curricular day, is unconstitutional; so, I can't support this."

And though the remaining members of the education board seemed in favor of the bill when it was discussed at last week's meeting, many parent-based groups are not. Janis Sartucci, a member of the Parent's Coalition of Montgomery County, which opposes the bill, has been documenting the correspondence between the coalition and Madaleno's office and posting it to the group's blog.

"Sen. Madaleno continues to ignore the Maryland Constitution and its guarantee of a free public education for Maryland students," Sartucci wrote Nov. 15. "What Constitutional amendment will Sen. Madaleno be proposing to allow MCPS to charge students to ride public school buses?"

Madaleno has not yet confirmed when the bill will be introduced before the General Assembly.